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**PERMEABLE BORDERS, POSSIBLE WORLDS:  
HISTORY AND IDENTITY IN THE  
NOVELS OF MICHÈLE ROBERTS**

Since the publication of her first novel, *A Piece of the Night*, in 1978, Michèle Roberts continually has returned in her fiction to epiphanic moments which elide divisions in time and space. Roberts uses her own experience as a woman of two cultures (English and French), as well as fictionalized histories of other women, to inform powerful narratives in which the borders of history, culture, and identity are blurred and rewritten. This piece will address the extent to which such fictions engage with contemporary debates about the fragmentation and reconstruction of feminine identity. While certain French feminist theorists have come under fire for a depoliticized and elitist reconstruction of femininity, I will argue that siting such discussion within narrative fictions offers a logical and accessible location for theorizing the possible [[Is this ok? the “(im)” has been retained on p. 17 where the reader will have more context]].

Michèle Roberts's first three novels, *A Piece of the Night* (1978), *The Visitation* (1983), and *The Wild Girl* (1984), interrogate established notions of history and identity through an unconventional form of Bildungsroman. These narratives are uncomfortable within their covers, wriggling within the confines of the novel as a place in which female characters traditionally have been written as wife, daughter, nun, and whore (1–19). *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), and *Daughters of the House* (1992) can be read differently—as attempts to escape the closure of these “resolutions of romance” (DuPlessis 1) and to imagine something beyond them. If the first three novels set about exploding particular mythologies of femininity, Roberts's later work attempts to imagine a feminine identity which is productive rather than restrictive. Her increasingly overt use of historical material as the bases for her fiction indicates a continuing fascination with literally rewriting history, re-imagining the past in order to imagine different possible futures. Yet even in these reconstructive narratives, each solution is heavily problematized, placed under scrutiny and found wanting.

The paradox evident in all these novels parallels that found in contemporary feminist theory: that of the desire for and distrust of a static and unitary identity. Contemporary feminist fiction and theory frequently appear to be in dialogue in their attempts to describe a position within the social and cultural order which does not impose untenable restraints on the feminine gendered subject, but frees her up to a productive and creative existence in relation to herself and others. For the last two decades, essays have been appearing in feminist books and journals which debate “the identity crisis in feminist theory,” [[source & p.?]] and none addresses the issue so poignantly as those which employ the metaphor of “home” (Adams; Alcoff; Martin and Mohanty; Soper). The mobile, negotiated sense of home-in-process which such essays evoke is evident in Roberts’s work in the manners in which identity is constructed *through* history and space is claimed in relation to a particular account of time. These narratives draw parallels between women who exist in different times. Each protagonist is shown working to construct her own sense of self through a reconstruction of time and space, in more and less successful ways. Certain protagonists, such as Hat in *In the Red Kitchen*, adopt a “masculine” authority in an attempt to inscribe themselves within linear history, while others, like Flora Milk in the same novel, produce a masquerade of femininity in an attempt to evade or control the masculine economy. Each narrative’s form reflects such linear and non-linear tactics. There is an uncanny tension in all Roberts’s novels between the apparent construction of a linear narrative and the implicit or explicit deconstruction of that narrative. This tension reflects upon a similar tension with regard to identity, as the unity/fragmentation of the narrative offers commentary upon the unity/fragmentation of the female protagonists—a relationship played out most explicitly in idiosyncratic Bildungsroman narratives which veer toward Künstlerroman.

Michèle Roberts’s novels implicitly propose the act of, or quest for, narration as a means of reconstructing feminine identity. In all of the novels, at least one of the protagonists is a writer or moves towards writing in some form. Writing the self does not provide a simple resolution, however; as Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes, the writing woman represents a cultural contradiction: “Using the female artist as a literary motif dramatizes and heightens the already-present contradiction in bourgeois ideology between the ideals of striving, improvement and visible public works and the feminine version of that formula: passivity, ‘accomplishments’, and invisible private acts” (84). The figure of the protagonist-writer which surfaces in each of Roberts’s novels thus represents a conflict between the public and

the private, between the symbolic modes associated with masculinity and femininity.

DuPlessis proposes “writing beyond the ending” as a productive way out of this gendered paradox:

As a narrative pattern, the romance plot muffles the main female character, represses quest, valorizes heterosexual as opposed to homosexual ties, incorporates individuals within couples as a sign of their personal and narrative success.... [T]he romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole. Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. These tactics, among them reparenting, woman-to-woman and brother-to-sister bonds, and forms of the communal protagonist, take issue with the mainstays of the social and ideological organization of gender, as these appear in fiction. Writing beyond the ending ... produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised. (5)

In the ten novels Roberts has produced to date, such a strategy is repeatedly interrogated, initially through an examination of the romance plot but increasingly through an examination of the betrayal of women by women. Writing beyond the ending is revealed in these narratives to be a difficult project.

The critical depiction of heterosexual romance in Michèle Roberts’s texts may undermine “the sex-gender system as a whole” (DuPlessis 5) through a close scrutiny of sexuality and gender relations within the heterosexual paradigm, but novels such as *The Visitation* and *The Wild Girl* do not entirely escape the “romance plot.” *The Visitation* was, according to Roberts herself, an attempt “to imagine a way of loving men that did not exclude loving women friends” (“The Woman Who Wanted to Be a Hero” 61), but it also becomes a debate about the strong draw of the heterosexual romance plot for women and consequent difficulties of evading such traditional forms of closure. While DuPlessis’s critical analysis of the narrative pattern of the romance plot is convincing, she proposes the strategy of “writing beyond the ending” as a relatively unproblematic departure from the “sex-gender system.” *The Visitation* and *The Wild Girl*, in their representation of heterosexual romances which are always already compromised by their socio-cultural environment, question whether such easy

departure is possible through narratives which struggle to avoid conventional endings while recognising their gravitational pull.

*The Visitation* shifts constantly between unity and fragmentation as it tells the story of Helen, a woman writer who is attempting to construct a unitary identity for herself. When she is about to start writing, "Helen always feels she has to cancel her body out, become pure mind. Genderless, transcendent, like a man" (99). She summons up images of her male twin, Felix, and looks at old diaries, becoming aware that "She has been a word struggling to be spoken, to be heard and understood. Only she still doesn't know what that word is" (100). Throughout the novel Helen searches for that word, and it becomes increasingly apparent that she will never find it. Helen's desire to be a "man," to be a "word," is an expression of her desire to be "whole," to be regarded and to regard herself as a unified subject. The depiction of masculinity in *The Visitation* is little more than a cypher. Helen does not want to be a "man" as such, but like Julie Fanchot in *A Piece of the Night*, to be something other than Woman. By depicting femininity as central through the characters of Helen and Beth, Roberts makes masculinity the second sex in *The Visitation*. The male characters—Steven, George, Robert, and Felix—together with the abstract masculinity referred to above, are part of the "otherness" which besieges Helen, an "otherness" which represents not "wholeness" and unity but the fictionality of those constructs.

In *The Visitation* it is necessary that the protagonist construct an identity for herself before she can begin to write, and that identity is constructed with the tools to hand: the support of her relationships with a female friend and a male lover and also through a system of images with which Helen is attempting to create her own mythology. In doing so, Helen becomes a mythographer, a writer or narrator of myths, and in this narrative the myths are clearly fictions, beliefs that are untrue yet necessary. As Roberts herself stated in response to a question about her own writing methods, "this does not mean false, but created" ("Questions" 67). If Helen's mythologizing of herself and her work remains ambivalent, it also remains unfinished and therefore continuous. In the chapter where Helen and her friend Beth explore a forgotten garden, *The Visitation* becomes an annunciation, with each woman's bringing the other to a "birth" of words. Beth acts as Helen's spiritual midwife, commanding her to "sing of her redemption, her life, to speak, to write. She orders her: now define self, now define woman. The heart of the labyrinth is not the end but another beginning. Start to write." (173)

*The Wild Girl's* heterosexual romance plot concludes with an expressive dead end—the disappearance of Mary Magdalen “with a baggage of doubt” (180)—but reappears in *In the Red Kitchen* with the relationship between Hattie and her flame-haired artist. The romance plot’s gravitational pull continues to exert a powerful force on contemporary women’s writing as the utopian destination which has traditionally been assigned to women in Western culture. In Michèle Roberts’s novels, the romance plot moves between the status of background colour and central focus as the various narratives within the text compete for attention, yet it is always present. Her novels acknowledge the power of this traditional destination without fully reaching it. *The Visitation* and *The Wild Girl*, in particular, play with the form of the romance plot without providing closure; there are no unproblematic happy endings here.

Steve Cohan and Linda M. Shires describe Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveller* as a narrative strip-tease:

Increasing your investment in narrative every time it begins a new story but deferring your satisfaction every time it fails to complete any story at all, *If on a winter’s night a traveler* [sic] narrates you as a reader who, expecting ‘books to be read from beginning to end’, actively seeks narrative closure as a source of pleasure. (151)

Calvino’s technique, which “short-circuits the completion of story again and again” (Cohan and Shires 150), was adopted by Roberts in her seventh novel, *Flesh and Blood* (1994), which offers a series of narratives dovetailing into each other and withholding the pleasure of closure, each story concluding with a colon rather than a full stop. *Flesh and Blood* is Roberts’s most experimental narrative to date, exploding the boundaries of a linear plot with a concluding resolution. Here, the traditional full stop at the end of a novel is supplanted by a colon, which suggests there are more stories to be told. Yet the other novels may also be understood as a similar project on a grander scale—as a series of experiments rather than singular hermetic texts. *The Visitation* and *The Wild Girl* work together as debates about heterosexual romance, and the motifs common to *A Piece of the Night* and *Daughters of the House*—the family home in France, the photograph collection, the broken dish—suggest a cyclical form to this series. Each novel reflects back on its predecessor, picking up debates and introducing new questions, so that these texts collectively form a spiralling narrative which is still clearly active.

The novels thus suggest the pleasure and possibility of writing and reading beyond the ending, evading both closure and concrete definition. If narrative and identity are aligned in these texts, however, there is also anxiety about the survival of particular narratives and of certain forms of identity. Patricia Waugh has commented on the propensity of contemporary women's writing for the evasive text, but notes an underlying concern to reconstitute or conserve some form of identity: "It is interesting that more women writers are now drawing on postmodernist narrative techniques—Carter, Winterson, Weldon, Lessing, Atwood, Tennant, Gee—in ways which resist the nihilistic implication of much of the theory by using disruptive forms to re-imagine the world we live in" (70).

Michèle Roberts clearly fits within that list of authors in her experiments with narrative style and historical fictions. One area in which the tension between playful deconstruction and practical reconstruction is particularly apparent is in the portrayal of the writing woman. While these novels celebrate excessive narratives—stories which work beyond closure, reveling in the fluidity and free play of intertextuality—they also raise questions about what this offers the feminist subject. Barthes's concept of the text as "a braided texture or a network of codes" which resists the concept of narrative as "an impenetrable monolithic and solid whole" [[is this Barthes quoted in *C & S*, or is it their paraphrase?]] is clearly applicable here. These narratives "produce the 'noise' and 'volume' of textuality, and ... exceed the finitude and coherence of a whole, formal structure" [[if the previous is a quotation from Barthes, is this also? (per MLA we only need the one reference at the end of the paragraph since both quotes come from the same page, but if the editors are quoting Barthes, I will insert "qtd. in" above]] (Cohan and Shires 118), but even in the loudest manifestation of this braided text there is an evident desire for presence, for some practicable reconstruction of identity in the narrative.

In *The Book of Mrs Noah*, the relation between the intermittent stories and the central narrative offers a contradictory textual identity which vacillates between self-contained linear narratives and a playfully peripatetic narrative style. *The Book of Mrs Noah* thus wavers between notions of concrete identity and absence of identity in narrative. There is significant emphasis in the second and third stories (chapters 19 and 24) on a conventional presence, or identity, which may be communicated in historical narratives—a desire to exist in narrative and, through writing, to be remembered. The medieval nun and the Elizabethan lady are determined to inscribe themselves in language, speaking in first-person narratives

directly to their sisters and daughters. Narrative, however fragmentary and fragile, is regarded as a means of communication, a means of being heard.

In the fifth and sixth stories—third-person accounts of Barbara, the twentieth-century food writer, and Mouse, the child of a dystopian future[[past (1984)?]]—the act of narration and, accordingly, the protagonist's identity, are more problematic. These last two stories are detached from any sense of the past or future, locked into a present which is a nihilistic version of postmodern subjectivity. If identity is simply a mask—nothing more than competing historical narratives and codes—there is no comment to be made, no argument to be constructed, just free play between subjectivities floating along the information superhighway with no idea of where they might be going or who is paying for the electricity. Mouse, living in a parodic 1984 with “Big Mummy,” is a woman without a past attempting to construct some sense of self and the future through poetic word-play. She is both a reflection on the cultural present and a warning of possible futures in which politics, let alone political action, appear to be absent from the cultural agenda.

These examples of desire for both linear and peripatetic narratives of identity and history are paradigmatic of the manner in which the protagonist-writer in many of Roberts's novels is brought to the point of writing, a process which is never depicted as an easy resolution. Just as the grasp of the medieval nun and the Elizabethan lady on their own narratives is depicted as deeply problematic in their emphasis on language as a transparent means of speaking to the future, so the narratives (about to be) produced by the protagonist-writers are presented as transient, partial, and prone to different readings. This vacillation between a linear masculine economy and a peripatetic feminine economy of language reflects upon debates visible in French feminist writings which draw on Lacanian models. While certain of these “new French feminisms” offer access to areas of play, flirtation, and *jouissance*, they have also been liable to accusations of essentialism and of representing a distractingly metaphysical side-track from the central journey of materialist feminist politics. Jane Miller levels this latter accusation specifically at the work of Julia Kristeva:

Kristeva may even be thought to have seduced some of the most imaginative feminist writers into an obscure, virtually mystical terrain and into forms of linguistics and psychoanalysis which are perilously individualised, unsocial and inhospitable to productive scrutiny. Their endeavours have at times become divorced from those other (surely crucial) endeavours, for which Kristeva cava-



lierly recommends the retaining of slogans like “we are women.”  
(25)

Other critics, such as Toril Moi, largely advocate Kristeva’s approach, and in the last fifteen years or so the “New French Feminisms” of writers such as Kristeva and Luce Irigaray have become accepted and acceptable within British literary academic discourse (Jones 96–106). One of the most productive means of reading this form of French feminist theory (and psychoanalytic theory in general) is to regard it as a descriptive rather than prescriptive and totalizing narrative. As Elizabeth Grosz points out, the “metaphysical” aspect of these French feminists’ work should be regarded primarily as a means of assault on male-dominated knowledges:

This does not ... mean that they are either not feminist or that they are elitist. Rather, it implies that feminist struggles are multidirectional, occurring in many different practices, including the practice of the production of meanings, discourses and knowledges.... Kristeva, Irigaray and Le Doeuff do not proclaim a new female language, nor new non-patriarchal knowledges: instead they rupture the apparent self-evidence of prevailing models in order to make new modes of knowing and writing possible. They celebrate the possibility of different forms of desire, pleasure and representation.  
(234)

Michèle Roberts’s novels offer themselves in parallel with this account of feminist theory—like Kristeva et al., they do not proclaim a feminine form of narrative but play upon and with prevailing masculine models in order to imagine something different. From *A Piece of the Night* to *The Looking Glass* (2000), Roberts has produced fictions within fictions and narratives with multiple narrators who contradict each other, unsure of themselves and their stories. Increasingly, Roberts’s work has reinvented historical characters and moments to propose a different, imaginary history which reflects upon and questions its “real” sources.

Such playful reinvention is evident in her fifth novel, *In the Red Kitchen*, in which a section of the narrative is located in the prehistory of Freudian discourse—in Jean-Martin Charcot’s lecture theatre at the Salpêtrière (Showalter 145–64). The Freudian family romance which suffuses Flora Milk’s narrative reaches its climax in this scene; Flora is in the presence of the father of modern psychoanalysis, via Charcot:

Mother is jealous of Flora, of her golden curls and dimples. Mother is ugly. She has no time to play with Daddy like Flora does. Daddy loves Flora best. They love each other so much. Mother is old. Flora is frightened she will die. Flora stands in the kitchen doorway, watching her mother cry, head laid on her hands on the table. Flora dances for Dr Charcot and for William just like she dances for her daddy. (127)

Flora performs as an hysteric for Charcot, copying the poses of Augustine, Charcot's star patient, whose photographs Flora had seen in his office (Showalter 149–54). Freud is implicitly present as the “daddies” for whom Flora, the Victorian medium, performs, so that the novel's critique of materialist science versus mediumistic spiritualism is also an examination of the power relations implicit in the process of psychoanalysis. While the novel is self-consciously post-Freudian in this scene, it is clearly also post-Lacanian in its discussion of language and the written word.

Flora and Hat's association with writing is dramatized through their relationships with their fathers. Hat's Pharaoh father offers her language as a sign of office, while Flora's father is a printer by trade, literally instrumental in the linguistic means of production. Hat, Flora Milk's spirit guide, is based on an ancient Egyptian queen, a predecessor of Akhenaten and Tutankhamun:

Hat-shepsut claimed that her father had appointed her his co-regent and in the presence of the entire court declared her to be his successor. It is generally agreed by Egyptologists that this post hoc justification of her seizure of power is wholly fictitious.... She evidently thought her claims superior to those of her young step-son, and had herself represented in all the trappings and titulary of a male Pharaoh [[Pharaoh?]]. Some twenty years after her death, Tuthmosis III had all mention of her expunged from the records and altered her monuments so as to suppress her name. It was not appropriate that the Living Horus should be a female, though several queens in Egypt's history attempted to usurp male prerogatives. (Aldred 40)

One significant aspect of this history is that the Egyptians are commonly considered to be the first culture to introduce a systematic form of writing with their use of hieroglyphic symbol.

Hat's narrative continually emphasizes the significance and power of writing in the creation of history. While Terence Milk, Flora's father, symbolizes language through his status as patriarch and printer, Hat's father has her taught to write because of the written word's literal power and its relation to his kingship. Flora is an avid reader of everything available (20)—literature for her becomes imagination and escape—while Hat learns the skills of a scribe in order literally to inscribe her power. Hat's narrative describes a hierarchy of power and language which is perceived as exclusively masculine: "The profession of the scribe ... sets a boy on the path towards the gods. My father's scribes are learned men who know literature, mathematics, medicine, the secrets of religion.... To write is to enter the mysterious, powerful world of words, to partake of words' power, to make it work for me" (24). The power Hat desires is that of her father. Hat does not wish merely to be desired by her father, although she does become his wife and lover, but to be him:

I do not need a mother, for I have my father. The ways of women are stupid and frivolous; I scorn them. I am not a woman like other women.... I am as good as a boy.... I speak with men; I speak as men do; I speak of men's things. I am better than other women.... I walk in my father's way, the only way I wish to know, the one true way. (53)

In order to gain power she must become a man; she must reject her own gender and all its cultural associations in order to make herself male, or at least *not* female. Neither Hat nor Flora approaches a deconstruction of the terms *masculine* and *feminine*; rather, each accepts and works within her contemporary constructions of those definitions. Hat attempts to re-create herself as masculine, while Flora accedes to the femininity of her time, negotiating some space for herself within Victorian society. Neither character is portrayed within the novel as being either successful or ultimately happy with her lot.

Hat's and Flora's narratives can be read as enacting a feminist morality tale: one cannot escape definitions of gender without changing the structure of the society which constructs those definitions. Hat attempts to reinvent herself as masculine, but the cultural associations of sex and gender outlive her. Flora invents herself as feminine, betraying her female friends and family as she gives priority to the men in her life. If *In the Red Kitchen* is a feminist morality tale, are we left with the twentieth-century woman, Hattie King, as the "good woman"? It would be comforting to

read *In the Red Kitchen* as a text which proposes a progressive feminist history—with Hat trying masculinity, Flora femininity, and Hattie King finally triumphing with a contemporary identity which moves beyond gender stereotypes—but this novel does not offer such tidy conclusions.

Hattie King is not a woman who exists outside cultural definitions of gender; rather, she recognises those definitions and manipulates them in order to reach her goal—to own her home. Unlike her predecessors Hat and Flora, Hattie King travels through countries and cultures, re-creating herself as chauffeur, cook, writer, and prostitute. Her relation to gender is playful and less constrictive than those of Hat and Flora, but the parameters still exist. Hattie is thus not a utopian role model but very much the consequence of her spiritual ancestors [[is this ok? I replaced “predecessors” since it was used a couple sentences ago; however, I’m unfamiliar with this work, so please correct if I’ve altered your meaning]]. The home which Hattie buys is Flora’s house, resonating with echoes of Flora’s life, a ghost of the past which only Hattie can see and hear. Hattie somehow has access to this mobile, uncertain form of history, but there is also a more concrete history hidden in boxes in the attic—a history which is confiscated at the end of the novel. One of Flora’s descendants arrives to take away two cardboard boxes:

He wore a navy blazer with gilt buttons, smooth tubes of grey terylene trousers, a red and blue striped tie.... I’d got the two boxes out of the attic behind the bed in our room and lugged them down to the sitting room in preparation for his coming. No dead body in the attic after all; just boxes overlooked by Miss Cotter’s relatives when they cleared the house. Cardboard boxes grimy with dust, sealed with brown masking tape. He tore back the tops to check the contents. I peered over his shoulder. The first one was full of old children’s books.... The second box contained a pile of old photograph albums bound in red half-calf. Tissue paper between the leaves, faded brown silk markers. Frizzy-haired beauties in starched blouses and boaters, fat pasty babies in frocks, scowling matrons in black tents, young men with moustaches striking jokey poses. Images fading fast on glossy pasteboard. Underneath, the legends in neat brown copperplate: on the beach at Southend; Flora puts her hair up; Rosina’s wedding day. The old man slapped the album shut when he saw how interested I was.

– Family souvenirs. Mustn’t touch. They’re very precious.

Tucked down the side were several stiff exercise books beautifully bound in brown paper. I squinted at the writing on the cover of the one nearest to me. Roman capitals, black and well-spaced. Something about milk. Then the old man closed the box and picked it up. (138)

This passage implies that little has changed: that men are still grabbing history, closing the boxes, not wanting women to see. The cardboard boxes probably contain Flora's story, in her own words, in those "stiff exercise books"—yet Hattie already knows this story, doesn't she? Her visions of Flora surely offer a history which is more authentic than even the Victorian medium's diaries. If the novel ended at this point there would be some grounds for this argument; Hattie's final narrative is followed, however, by the voices of Flora, Minny, Hat, and Rosina.

Flora's final narrative is full of regret, and Hat disappears, while Minny and Rosina write letters to Mamma and Mr. Redburn, respectively, which speak eloquently of their betrayals of other women. The women who appear to triumph in this novel are those who can play "femininity" most successfully. Metaphysical communications between Hat, Flora, and Hattie may set up an invisible line of historical connection between women, but it does little to undermine traditional configurations of gender and power. If *In the Red Kitchen* prescribes anything, it is the development of an historical practice which embraces mobility, as opposed to the stasis depicted in the work of Charcot and Preston, a practice which recognises that, while a concrete sense of the past is necessary, historical orthodoxies must always come under suspicion. The "dead body in the attic," in this sense, is the two cardboard boxes full of Flora's history, and Hattie and Flora's male descendent represent two poles of possibility for that body of knowledge. With Hattie, the body is ephemeral, briefly glimpsed, and never fully in view; with the male descendent the body is preserved, embalmed, possessed as precious, and hidden away. History, within *In the Red Kitchen* and in the play between the novel and its sources, is in motion between these two possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

Freud and Lacan are evident in these narratives, but the dominant discourse of the novel—the communications across time and space which Flora's private spiritualism and Hattie's vision represent—offers an active critique of the orthodoxies of Freudian and Lacanian models of identity. Hat and Flora are trapped within models of psychic development which condemn them to destructive repetitions, silence, and death. Hattie, the contemporary writer, offers a possible alternative to the family romance

scenario in the *jouissance* of her itinerant early life, together with the pleasures which accompany her purchase of Flora's crumbling house and her relationship with the flame-haired artist. Significantly, Hattie is an orphan, unparented and therefore symbolically free of the family romance plot; she has no father to please and no mother to betray. According to DuPlessis:

Freudian theory, postulating the telos of "normal femininity" as the proper resolution of the oedipal crisis, bears an uncanny resemblance to the nineteenth-century endings of narrative, in which the female hero becomes a heroine and in which the conclusion of a valid love plot is the loss of any momentum of quest. The pitfalls to be avoided by a woman seeking normal femininity are very consistent with the traits of the female hero in narrative: defiance, activity, selfishness, heroic action, and identification with other women. For Freudian theory puts a high premium on female passivity and narcissism and on the "end" of husband, home, and male child. As for quest or individual aspiration, Freud poignantly realizes that the achievement of femininity has left "no paths open to [a woman] for further development; ... [it is] as though, in fact, the difficult development which leads to femininity had exhausted all the possibilities of the individual." [". (?)]] By the repressions and sacrifices involved in becoming feminine, [[“the” here in original?]] quest is at a dead end—a sentiment that we have seen replicated in narrative endings. (35) [[a previous quotation (see p. 2) from DuPlessis's work contains single quotation marks around the internal quotation, but here there are double quote marks. Which is correct? (We have Americanized the British punctuation in all contributors' articles, but we will retain it in quotations).]]

It is consequently ironic that Hattie, the modern "free woman," is about to become a parent herself at the end of the novel. Hattie, her lover, and the child in her womb form a new nuclear family within Flora's crumbling Victorian tenement; is this a resurrection of the Freudian family romance or even a reassertion of "family values"? The conclusion of the novel, with the last word going to Rosina (Flora's sister who betrays and is betrayed by her sibling), offers an ominous ending. Will Hattie and her new family evade the Oedipal scenario which ensnared her predecessors? The implication is that successful and productive modes of femininity are, like feminism, "not achieved" but still in process (De Lauretis 7).

One of the spaces in which this process occurs is in the momentary visions and epiphanies experienced by Roberts's protagonists. These experiences are enacted within the novels as desire for both narrative closure and excess. Hattie in *In the Red Kitchen* sits by a fire with the window open and becomes "A temporary union of opposites, the nearest I get to the idea of God, that makes me shiver inside with delight. I'm whole, for a moment, enclosing heat and cold together; and I'm different parts, half belonging to heat and half to cold; I'm the point at which these two worlds meet" (16–17). The young Léonie in *Daughters of the House* waits for the moment in the middle of the Channel when she is both (and neither) English and French:

For at that moment true language was restored to her. Independent of separated words, as whole as water, it bore her along as a part of itself, a gold undercurrent that connected everything, a secret river running underground, the deep well, the source of life, a flood driving through her, salty breaker on her own beach, streams of words and non-words, voices calling out which were staccato, echoing, which promised bliss. Then the boat churned on. (35–36)

In these spaces—somewhere between discourses of historical determinism (the dead hand of the past) and metaphysical agency (the free play of *jouissance*)—lies the hope of a different future. In this sense it is a space of possible, if transitory, transformation. This bears comparison with Michèle Le Doeuff's description of the imaginary, which in contrast to Lacan's concept of its function in ego formation regards the imaginary as

... a rhetorical term which refers to the use of figures or imagery in philosophical and other texts. [Le Doeuff] [[I have replaced "she" here--is this correct?]] sees it as a kind of "thinking-in-images," the use of narrative, pictorial or analogical structures within knowledges. In this sense, the imaginary is symptomatic of an (intellectual and political) elision: it marks those places within philosophical texts where the discourse is unable to admit its founding assumptions and must cover them over. It signals thus a point of critical vulnerability within texts and arguments, a site for what otherwise remains unspeakable and yet necessary for a text to function. (Grosz xviii–xix)

In this manner Roberts's novels move on from Freudian and Lacanian dramas to engage in debates with French feminist theories of language and writing which have attempted to signal ways out of this dead end: *sorties*. This may be regarded with some suspicion as a potential step back towards liberal humanist notions of the subject, as in Frank Kermode's citation of Wallace Stevens's idea of "Supreme Fiction": "such a fiction of the end is like infinity plus one and imaginary numbers in mathematics, something we know does not exist, but which helps us to make sense of and to move in the world" (37). Yet the texts themselves exhibit a suspicion of such convenient fictions. By interrogating concepts such as *écriture féminine* they puzzle at the practicability and efficacy of such *sorties*. These narratives address and employ discourses of psychoanalysis and French feminist theory, but they do not swallow them whole.

In "Castration or decapitation?" Hélène Cixous offers a definition of *écriture féminine*:

This is how I would define a feminine textual body: as a female libidinal economy, a regime, energies, a system of spending not necessarily carved out by culture. A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there's no closure, it doesn't stop, and it's this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read. For we've learned to read books that basically pose the word "end." But this one doesn't finish, a feminine text goes on and on and at a certain moment the volume comes to an end but the writing continues and for the reader this means being thrust into the void. These are texts that work on the beginning but not on the origin. The origin is a masculine myth: I always want to know where I come from. The question "Where do children come from?" is basically a masculine, much more than a feminine, question. The quest for origins, illustrated by Oedipus, doesn't haunt a feminine unconscious. Rather it's the beginning, or beginnings, the manner of beginning, not promptly with the phallus in order to close with the phallus, but starting on all sides at once, that makes a feminine writing. A feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over. (53)

There are echoes here of exhortations in *The Visitation*—"to begin, over and over again" (176) and "The heart of the labyrinth is not the end but another beginning. Start to write" (173)—and also resonances with the methodology of Michèle Roberts's prose fiction as a whole. Like Cixous,



who repeats herself in different essays, or perhaps begins again and again, Roberts's work is continuous and continuing.<sup>2</sup> Themes and images recur in these novels; they will not be finished or defined in one text but reappear in different guises and contexts in the next.

Michèle Roberts's biographical appropriateness for French feminist theory, as a woman whose parentage straddles the Channel, does not necessarily entail the absence of a more Anglocentric materialist politics, but does at times seem to imply a similar seduction by *l'écriture féminine* as that which Miller ascribes to Kristeva's work. In an interview Roberts described how she gets "... this enormous pleasure from reading French. It's *la jouissance*—I absolutely know what that means—because it's the language of my mother. It's me intimate with my mother when I read even French feminists, who she would loathe if ever she read them" (128). Roberts's narratives evoke a magical "other" place which, while exciting and inspirational, fails to offer practicable solutions. Consequently, these novels self-consciously apply themselves to Cixous's description of writing the feminine, but only in order to experiment with this idea, not to prove its existence. The texts themselves appear conscious of this distinction. The confiscation of boxes full of Flora's material history—her photographs and diaries—by the ominous old man in a blazer at the end of *In the Red Kitchen* indicates that, while the connection between Flora and Hattie may have been authentic, it will remain immaterial and private rather than entering the public sphere. It is therefore clear that this is a moment of connection which cannot be shared with other women. Similarly, when Léonie is going to make public her knowledge about the identity of the Nazi informer at the end of *Daughters of the House*, she admits, "I had no real proof it was the priest" (171). Her private knowledge of history may not stand up in court; such knowledges may disintegrate in the public arena.

These metaphysical histories may be transient, but they are also transitory; they easily disappear, and their presence as "ghosts in the library" (Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah* 89) cannot be guaranteed. These texts desire both the pleasure of closure, which offers the subject narrative presence, and the pleasure of exceeding boundaries, offering infinite possibilities for play but also entailing potential absence. Roberts's novels, as I have read them, are therefore not strictly *féminine* texts according to Cixous's definition; these narratives evade closure but also desire it. The stories they tell are always already inscribed by the tradition of the story (the novel) in Western culture, offering quest narratives which have unorthodox, inconclusive endings, but endings nevertheless.

What this implies is a different understanding of identity and how identity is constructed. In the work of Julia Kristeva, this produces a vision of the subject-in-process which is directly inspired by psychoanalytic practice:

The Kristevan subject is a subject-in-process (*sujet en procès*), but a subject nevertheless. We find her carrying out once again a difficult balancing act between a position which would deconstruct subjectivity and identity altogether, and one that would try to capture these entities in an essentialist or humanist mould. (Moi, *The Kristeva Reader* 13)

This concept of the subject-in-process is attractive, effectively evading problematic notions of identity as a conclusive, hermetic destination. To go beyond the notion of the subject-in-process entails the risk of reinforcing prescriptive ontologies. The solution offered here is the subject as potential artisan, creating the self through language:

The modern, unstable and empty subject, [Kristeva] argues, ought not to be fixed and stabilized, but to be turned into a work in progress. This means that psychoanalytic patients must be left, at the end of analysis, in a position which enables them to express themselves. But expression requires subjectivity, and therefore the Law, which constructs speaking subjects in the first place. Perhaps, therefore, the speaking or writing one ought to seek out for such patients would be imaginative and imaginary, Kristeva argues, since this is the only kind of activity that can fill the narcissistic void without fixing it in a too rigid concept of “self.” (Moi, *Kristeva* 14)

In Roberts’s novels, unsurprisingly, the creative and unstable world of imaginative writing is privileged; this is clearest at the end of *The Book of Mrs Noah* when Mrs Noah declares her intention to produce “writings that can be torn out, scribbled on a shirt cuff, chalked on a wall, drawn with a stick in the sand on the seashore and then washed away” (288).

Yet this [[sorry, I’ve lost the train of argument—to what does “this” refer?]] also indicates the limitations of this form of identity; such subjects are by definition fragile and insecure. While the notion of a more mobile subjectivity is attractive, and even fun, it risks the re-enactment of pitfalls of more static (humanist) theories of identity once the destination is mapped out. For this reason fiction seems to be an eminently appropriate

location for discussing mobile subjectivity, because this form of writing is inherently untrustworthy—inherently *fictional*. Whereas academic writings are situated within the bounds of rhetorical and formal discursive formations (boundaries which Kristeva and Cixous have deliberately sought to break), works of fiction are by definition more elastic, experimental and constantly evolving. Michèle Roberts's novels engage with and disseminate complex ideas about identity and history, raising questions for which there are no absolute answers and proposing impossible solutions.

This is not to say that such solutions are therefore unproblematic; is it really possible for every woman to grow up and become a writer? Don't these texts by Roberts and Kristeva both speak largely to and for a specific section of the population: namely, white, western, highly-educated, middle-class women—women who can afford to be “mobile”? I would respond that, yes, they probably do. Such writings speak to and for a particular constituency—as every form of writing does—yet in Michèle Roberts's fiction there is a wider possible readership. Whereas Kristeva et al. are available primarily through academic publication and dissemination, Roberts's fictions are available to a wider audience through a mainstream publication and distribution network. Setting aside the pitfalls of proposing art as the most viable means of expression, however, the notion of the subject-in-process is not only useful in theoretical terms but also descriptive of lived experience in late modernity in the West:

Thematizing ourselves as mobile subjectivities eschews the search for an essential reality to which our representations correspond, while claiming an historical residence in the contentious fields of late modernity and seeking strategies by which to stay honest about our affirmations while we keep moving toward them. (Ferguson 154)

This state of negotiation speaks eloquently to the more productive theorizations of postmodernity, inspiring a sense of recognition—isn't this a description of daily life? More to the point, this may also be read as a description of contemporary feminist politics both in the academy and at the grassroots level; for better or worse, we are all living in mobile homes. [[clever--nice ending. I enjoyed reading this.]]

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In addition to Hat, who is based on the Egyptian Pharaoh-queen Hatshepsut (and offers an allegorical reference to Margaret Thatcher, the British Prime Minister 1979–1990), the character of Flora Milk is closely based on the Victorian spiritualist medium Florence Cook. *In the Red Kitchen* shadows Florence's career as a medium, including her relationships with the paranormal investigator William Crookes (William Preston in the novel), her spirit guide Katie King (Hattie King in the novel), and her friend Mary Rosina Showers (Flora's sister Rosina in the novel). For further details, see Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*; Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England 1850–1914*; and Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*.

<sup>2</sup> Hélène Cixous's definition of the feminine text recurs, or continues, in "Sorties"—"defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be theorized, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist" (Cixous and Clément 92)—and in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (Marks and de Courtivron 245–64).

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